

The University of Chicago

THE COMPARATIVE
STRATIGRAPHY OF PREHISTORIC
MESOPOTAMIA

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE
HUMANITIES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ORIENTAL LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES

1940

By
ANN LOUISE PERKINS

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT

The archeologist who deals with prehistoric Mesopotamia is fortunate in having a considerable quantity of material available to him. Especially since the World War numerous expeditions to Iraq have excavated or tested site after site and at least partially published their results. We have therefore a great deal of evidence on the material culture of individual sites, particularly in the earliest periods of their occupation. Scholars have long recognized, however, that we cannot properly evaluate the evidence of any site by itself but must rather study each site in relation to all others which show comparable remains. It becomes therefore essential that we arrange all of our material into some sort of chronological sequence which will permit a comprehensive survey of the development of culture during the prehistoric periods, a sequence into which every occupation level of every excavated site in Mesopotamia can be fitted. It is the aim of the present study to establish such a chronological sequence.

In the pursuance of this task it has been necessary to study all available material, critically evaluating the significance both of the remains themselves and the circumstances in which they were found. Ideally one should see the actual objects and the sites from which they came, and the writer feels herself definitely handicapped by the impossibility of so doing. There is, however, a considerable amount of published material, and it has seemed possible after careful investigation of that evidence to formulate a sequence of culture periods and stages within each period which, if suspect in detail, at least in general represents an advance over our previous knowledge. The study is therefore presented, although with the full expectation that new discoveries or publications of extant material may cause a revision of certain conclusions which at present appear to be indicated by our material.

Previous to our study there have been several attempts to correlate the different discoveries in one coherent framework, most of these made by excavators endeavoring to fit all of the

material into the assumed sequence of their own particular sites. This unconfessed overemphasis on one site at the expense of the others naturally produced a series of distorted pictures, for no one site as yet excavated presents a complete view of the cultural development of prehistoric Mesopotamia. In 1932 there appeared the first correlation of the available evidence with the sole aim of establishing a sequence of cultures,¹ and this monograph has formed the basis of stratigraphy for all subsequent studies. Since that time, however, much new material has come to light which has forced us to change completely our method of approach to the problems of Mesopotamian stratigraphy.

The first excavated sites which produced prehistoric remains were in Babylonia--²Al Ubaid, Abu Shahrain, Tello, Ur, Warka, and Kish. Having this material and knowing Assyria only from much later times, scholars came to the understandable assumption that Babylonia was the center of Mesopotamian culture even in the fifth and fourth millennia, and that what was found there represented the earliest stages of the settlement of man in the valley of the Two Rivers. In 1932 and 1933 reports on the sondage beneath the Assyrian temple of Ishtar at Nineveh were published, revealing for the first time that traces of cultural stages unknown in Babylonia were to be found in Assyria. In 1934 Mallowan's report on the excavations of Tell Arpachiyah, a small site in the vicinity of Nineveh, proved conclusively that Assyria had extensive remains of a culture preceding the earliest known in the South. From that time on it has become increasingly evident that we must shift our focus of attention. Instead of seeing Sumer as the homeland and center of the prehistoric cultures, we see it demonstrably as the periphery almost up to the dawn of history, and it is to the North that we must look for an explanation of the phenomena which we find in the South.

The cultural dominance of Assyria is easily explicable. In the first place geology shows that the limestone plateau of

¹H. Frankfort, Archeology and the Sumerian Problem ("Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization," No. 4 [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1932]).

²Throughout this study we shall use the terms "Assyria" and "Babylonia" to apply to north and south Mesopotamia respectively, without any political connotation.

Assyria was habitable at a time when everything south of modern Baghdad was part of the Persian Gulf. How long a period of deposition was required before the Babylonian alluvium was formed we cannot say, but almost certainly many hundreds of years passed after Assyria was occupied before the first settlers could have lived even in the northern part of what we call Babylonia. It appears that a pre-Halaf period of unknown duration, the entire Halaf period, and considerably more than half of the Ubaid period had passed in the North before the earliest culture began in the South.

Also, from the time of its first settlement Assyria was open to influences from all sides. Arguably the very first settlers came from Syria, and certainly Syrian influence is patent in the earliest remains which we have. Perhaps contemporaneous with these Syrian influences and clearly recognizable in the early Halaf period, there are strong Iranian elements in the Mesopotamian culture; and throughout prehistory it is Iran which seems to furnish the most vital inspiration for Mesopotamia. Still a third influential center may be located to the north of Assyria in the mountain regions of which we as yet know practically nothing. So we find the Assyrian culture in an area on which from earliest times many streams of influence converged. Of Babylonia the same cannot be said; the only foreign influence, as far as we can tell, is Iranian, and even that seems to be derived secondarily through Assyria. It is therefore mandatory that we begin our study with the North and endeavor to establish the sequence of the earliest cultures there before bringing Babylonia into the discussion.

The epoch which we have entitled merely "pre-Halaf" shows a fusion of cultural elements; most of these we may recognize as of Syrian derivation, but certainly almost from the beginning the outlier of the Iranian Highland culture which we know in Mesopotamia as Samarra had already penetrated the country. So scattered are the remains of the pre-Halaf cultures and of such insufficient quantity that we hesitate to call this a true culture period; assuredly no site yet excavated may be called a type-site.

Following on this culture and almost certainly engendered by the strong Iranian influences present in Samarra, is the Halaf period. The name, which suggests a western center, if not a western origin, for the culture, is quite misleading since all of the evidence available at present points to the Mosul region as the

focal center of the Halaf settlements. In that region we can see the growth and development from a vigorous but primitive culture, exemplified in Ninevite 2c and Arpachiyah pre-10, to the gorgeous yet decadent phase of Gawra 21-20. In this epoch copper was already known, although very little has been found. The potter's wheel was not yet in use, and the only building material in Mesopotamia proper was pisé (unformed lumps of clay). But the arts of pottery-making, firing, and painting reached a level which was probably never equalled in prehistoric Mesopotamia.

Following the Halaf culture is an epoch which is clearly of Iranian origin. The Northern Ubaid period marks a decided change from that which precedes it, but seems to have built on Halaf to some extent and at last to have displaced it peacefully. The destruction of Arpachiyah level 6, the abrupt termination of the Halaf period there, and the equally abrupt supplanting of it by an Ubaid culture seems to be a purely local phenomenon; we shall see by the character of the remains that Arpachiyah shows no trace of the first Northern Ubaid phase and apparently there is a gap in the stratification of that site from the culminating point of the Halaf period until Northern Ubaid 2. At Tepe Gawra the Ubaid culture divides into three phases which, although distinct in character, seem to share a common basis; the last phase, Northern Ubaid 3, represents a fresh wave of influence from Iran, which may be localized to the southwestern part of that country, possibly the region between Susa and Fars. After the beginning of the third phase comes the first settlement of which we have any trace in the South. As we shall endeavor to show in detail, it appears to have been derived from the North rather than directly from Iran and possesses most of the distinctive features of Northern Ubaid 3. Once established in the South, however, the Ubaid cultures began to develop independently, and the distinctive marks of the end of the Northern Ubaid period are unrepresented in Babylonia. The Ubaid period in both North and South has yielded copper; it marks the introduction of mud brick as building material and the beginning of monumental architecture; and it has a new style of pottery painting which at its best is scarcely inferior to that of the Late Halaf.

At the beginning of the Uruk period the focus of attention comes to the South for the first time. It seems to have been brought about by a new wave of Northern influence, most clearly

tying Warka 14-13 with Ninevite 3, but from the time of its beginning the South takes cultural precedence over the North, a precedence which it keeps for many centuries. The Uruk period is the most significant of the prehistoric epochs. During its span we have the most magnificent architecture known until historic times; in fact, with the exception of the Acropolis of Gawra 13, all of the notable prehistoric architectural remains are of Uruk date. The cylinder seal is introduced in the South and, by steps as yet unknown to us, the unparalleled glyptic art of Warka 5-4 develops. In ceramics the fast wheel comes into use, and the repertoire of forms increases; painting of the Ubaid type continues for a while along with red and gray wares, but finally dies out completely. Stone carving begins to be of fine quality; the temple models and tiny amulets of the Anu ziggurat at Warka testify to a considerable knowledge of stone-working, and the sculptured vases which we know best from Jemdet Nasr deposits may possibly have begun in the late Uruk period. Most important of all, writing is invented and already in Warka 4 the script is beginning to lose its pictographic character.

What we call Jemdet Nasr is a late and specialized phase of the Uruk culture. It is quite impossible to find any one point at which to divide the two periods, for the characteristic elements of Jemdet Nasr come into existence at different times. For the present we have adopted the division point most commonly accepted--Warka 3 in the South and Gawra 8a in the North as the beginning of the Jemdet Nasr period. Painting of pottery revives at Jemdet Nasr and in Ninevite 5, but never again is there a unified style over the entire country. Artistic creation changes its character; in the South the cylinder seals degenerate noticeably but monumental art develops. Possibly the sculptured vases mark a transition to a purely monumental art, but that the latter existed already within the Jemdet Nasr period we know from Warka where an example of sculpture in the round of amazing quality has been found. By the end of the Jemdet Nasr period writing has come into relatively common use and the historic period begins with the Early Dynastic age.

Of tremendous significance for the cultural history of Mesopotamia is this unbroken continuance of culture from at least the beginning of the Ubaid period into Early Dynastic times. Through this great span of time we can see almost constant but

always gradual change; a new culture trait appears and is taken over by the community while an old one gradually dies out. But nowhere throughout the span is there a point at which we see a sudden change of culture and we must, in the writer's opinion, conclude that the bulk of the population remained the same from the Ubaid period up to historic times, continually influenced from outside, changing and developing under those influences, but always retaining its distinctive character.

It should be re-emphasized that in this study we are confined to published material, which is in many cases insufficient. Particularly unfortunate for our purpose is the fact that the material from Tepe Gawra, one of the key sites for Mesopotamian stratigraphy, is not yet published in full, and that the early material from the Oriental Institute's excavations in Iraq is only partially available for use. In the subsequent discussion we have followed the stratigraphy of the individual excavators as much as possible and utilized their terminology and designations of levels.

